

# NOUNS AND ADJECTIVES IN *THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE*\*

NISINARITA Michiwo

## 0. Introduction

The Owl and the Nightingale, written in the early 13th century, is said to be a debate poem describing the conflict between the religious poem, which had had a long tradition, and the romantic poem, which had just appeared. The conflict is also said to describe that between the old and the young, the monk and the troubadour, and so on. What is common in them is the conflict between the established institution with a long tradition and the newcomer that has to prove his worth or deny the authority of the other. I will see if and how this kind of conflict affected the choice of the nouns and adjectives in the poem with which the Owl and the Nightingale describe themselves and the other.

## 1. Owl's Self-evaluation

### 1.1 Adjectives

The Owl says in (1) that she is naturally *kene* “keen, fierce, brave” and this is why small birds dislike her.

- (1) For rihte cunde ich am so kene.  
Vorþi ich am loþ smale vowe  
þat fleoþ bi grunde t bi þuuele : (ll. 276-8)<sup>1</sup>

This is the reply to the Nightingale's accusation, referring to the Owl's nature to fly at night, that everything that avoids the right loves the darkness and hates the light (ll. 229-30). The Owl says that she acts at night because small birds fear her sharp beak and claws. Although she is disliked for her being *kene* and therefore she would rather fly at night she justifies herself saying that she is *so kene for riht cunde* in (1) and proudly in (2) and (3) :

- (2) þanne erest hit is isene  
Hwar is þe snelle, hwar is þe kene. (ll. 525-6)  
(3) Vor nys of ou non so kene,  
þat durre abide myn onsene. (ll. 1705-6)

She says in (2) that we will know who is *kene* only when we are in times of hardship ; in (3) she challenges the birds that surround her siding with the Nightingale at the end of the poem to look at her if they dare.

The Owl also describes herself as *snel* ‘active’ in (4), which is in the same passage with the example (2) ; *þanne* at the beginning refers to the time when hardship comes :

- (4) þanne ich am snel, t pleye t singe  
t hyhte me myd my skentinge : (ll. 531-2)

The Nightingale uses *kene* or *snel* not to describe her but to speak of a knight in line 768 and of a fox in line 829.

The Owl says in (5) that she is *witi* 'wise' and she foresees all that is coming ; this is why she is *sori-mod* 'sad' and *wroþ* 'angry' as in (6) :

- (5) For ich am [witi] ful iwis,  
t wo[t] al þat to comen is . (ll. 1189-90)  
(6) Ofte, vor myne muchele witte,  
Wel sori-mod t wroþ I sitte : (ll. 1217-8)

She knows that people dislike her as in (1), still she says that she does good to them in (7) in which they not only dislike her but kill and hang her on the hedge to scare away magpies and crows :

- (7) þu seyst þat ic am monne loþ,  
vch mon is wiþ me wroþ  
-----  
þah hit beo soþ, ic do heom god, (ll. 1607-15)

## 1.2 Nouns

The nouns that the Owl uses in describing herself are *wrecche* 'wretche being,' *wisdome* and *wit*, (8) comes after the examples (2) and (4) above, in which the Owl says that she is not a feeble wretch but she comforts those in need ; she also says in (9) and (10), which appear in the same context as (5), that from her *wisdome* at the church and *wit* she simply can foresee the future, nor does she bring about misfortune as the Nightingale accuses :

- (8) Vo[r] ish nam non aswunde wrecche. (l. 534)  
(9) Vor ic at chireche cume ilome,  
t muchel leorny of wisdom : (ll. 1211-2)  
(10) Hwi atwitestu me myne insihte,  
t [m]in iwit t myne myhte ? (ll. 1187-8)

The Owl argues that she is disliked because of her strictness with which she actively try to help people who are in trouble which she foresaw and warned them of, thus justifies his being disliked.

## 2. Nightingale's Self-evaluation

The Nightingale says in (11) that she is *war* 'cautious' and won't be deceived by the Owl's words. She also says in (12) that she is *þriste* 'bold' because she has *liste* 'cunning' and *crafte* :

- (11) Ne spedestu nouht mid þine vnwrenche,  
For ich am war and can bleche. (ll. 169-70)

- (12) For ic kan craft ic kan lyste,  
t þarfore ic am þus þriste. (ll. 757-8)

While the Owl is *kene* because she is an owl as in (1), the Nightingale is bold because she has learned *liste* and *crafte*. She also boasts that she is, unlike the Owl, favoured by people. If someone becomes angry at her it is their fault as in (13), where she comforted with her song the wife whom þe *knyht*, her husband, shut in out of jealousy :

- (13) Vorþan þe knyht wes wiþ me wroþ,  
Vor rihte hyþe ic wes him loþ : (ll. 1087-8)

The Nighingale brings out as her merit *crafte* and *liste* ; she says in (14) that she could fight better with her *liste* than the Owl would with all her strength ; in (15) she praises herself as being loved by people for her *crafte* while they keep the Owl away for her strength :

- (14) Ich wolde vyhte bet myd liste  
þan þu mid al þine strengþe, (ll. 172-3)  
(15) Vor myne crafte men me luuyþ,  
Vor þine strengþe men þe schunyþ. (ll. 791-2)

Although *liste*, often translated into ‘cunning,’ seems to have a derogatory connotation it can also be used along with *meokelec* ‘meekness’ and together they could defeat a demon(he þet ouercom mon in (16)) :

- (16) … he þet ouercom mon ere akeast þurh mon wið meokelec and liste,  
luðer strengþe … (Seinte Katerina : 452)

The Nightingale places a lot of importance on her skill, rejecting the strength of the Owl. She also values her *wit* higher than the Owl’s strength as in (17) :

- (17) Ich kan wit t song mony eine, (Cotton : man[t]eine)  
Ne triste ic to non oþer mayne : (ll. 759-60)

### 3. The Owl’s Evaluation of the Nightingale

#### 3.1 Adjectives

The Owl says in (18) that the Nightingale becomes *modi & breme* ‘passionate’ when it is the breeding season ; although she does not criticize her for it she warns that passionate love can not last long. But in (19) she says that the Owl is worthless because she only knows songs. They both use *wrecche* to blame the other as in (20) :

- (18) vor of golnysse is al þi song,  
t ayen [þet þu wilt teme],  
þu art wel mode t breme. (ll. 498-500)  
(19) þu nart bute o furw[u]rþe þing :  
On þe nys bute cateryng. (ll. 575-6)  
(20) Sey me nv, þu wrecche wiht, (l. 556)

### 3.2 Nouns

The Owl twice calls the Nightingale wretch ; she uses no other derogatory nouns against the Nightingale :

- (21) t wiltu, wrecche, wiþ me vyhte ? (l. 1669)

## 4. The Nightingale's Evaluation of the Owl

### 4.1 Adjectives

The Nightingale utters a lot ruder words than the Owl : she says in (22) that she would rather spit than sing of the Owl's *ful* 'foul' song ; in (24), (25) and (26) she says that the Owl is horrible to see and so on :

- (22) Me luste bet speten þane singe  
Of þine fule howelying. (ll. 39-40)
- (23) Ac yet þu, fule þing, me chist, (l. 1331)
- (24) þu art lodlich to biholde,  
And þu art loþ in monye volde : (ll. 71-2)
- (25) Ich wot þat þu art vn[m]ilde, (l. 61)
- (26) þine leches beoþ grisliche (l. 1140)

### 4.2 Nouns

The nouns the Nightingale uses to insult the Owl are *vnwiht* 'monster' and *ermyng* 'wretched being' :

- (27) "Vnwyht," heo seyde, "awey þu fleo !/..." (l. 33)
- (28) Ac þu, ermyng, þu wrecche gost ! (l. 1111)

## 5. Frequency

We will now see how often the evaluating adjectives and nouns are used by both birds on the table below :

	OWL			NIGHTINGALE		
	herself	N.	others	herself	Owl	others
Adjectives						
breme	0	1	1	0	0	0
ful	(2)	0+2	1*	0	4+8	3
furwurþe	0	1	1	0	0+1	0
kene	1	1	1	0	0	0
lodlich	0	0	0	0	2	0
loþ	1	0	0	2	3	2
modi	1	0	0	0	0	0
snell	1	0	2	0	0	2
sori-mod	1	0	0	0	0	0
þrist	0	0	0	1	1*	0

unclene	0	0	0	0	1	1
unlede	0	0	0	0	1	1
vuel	0	0	2	0	0	4
i)war	0	0	1	1	0	1
witi	1	0	0	0	0	0
wrecche	0	2+2	0	0	4	0
Nouns						
crafte	0	1*	0	2	1*	3
liste	0	0	0	2	0	2
vnrede	0	0	0	0	1	2
vnwiht	0	1	0	0	2+1	0
wisdom	1	0	0	1	1*	2
i)wit(te	3	0	1	1	0	4
wroð	2	0	0	1	1	3
wrecche	1*	2	0	0	2	1

( ): quotation<sup>2</sup>    \* : negative<sup>3</sup>    A+B : B is something concerning A<sup>4</sup>

We see in the Table above that the Nightingale often uses the contemptuous adjectives such as *ful*, *lodlich*, *loþ*. The new appear and try to assert themselves because they think that the old are no longer satisfactory. They may utter rude words when they realize how difficult to topple the old that are firmly established and get impatient. If the Owl represents the priest of those days the Nightingale may be blaming her for simony. Looking at the the Nightingale's choice of adjectives I can not agree with Attkins about the Nightingale ; he writes in his preface (p. lviii) that she (sc. the Nightingale) shows more self-restraint than the Owl.

The Nightingale uses the nouns of *crafte* and *liste* quite often. I think that this is because it is easy to show the superiority when it comes to *crafte* that the other does not have.

## 6. Comparison

The Nightingale makes use of the comparison, telling that she is superior to the Owl. She says in (14) that she could fight better with her *liste* than the Owl would with all her strength ; she argues in (29) that one craft of hers is better than all of the Owl's. She claims similarly in (30) and (31) :

- (14) Ich wolde vyhte bet myd liste  
þan þu mid al þine strengþe. (ll. 172-3)
- (29) Hwý axestu of craftes myne?  
Betere is myn on þan all þine,  
Betere is o song of myne muþe  
þan al þat [evre] þi kun kuþe : (ll. 711-4)
- (30) Betere is myn on (wrenche) þan þine twelue. (l. 836)

## 7. Conclusion

The Nightingale, representing the new, denounces the Owl with derogatory words, trying to

prove she is superior while the Owl does not use words as derogatory nor employ comparison because she, long-established, does not have as much necessity to assert herself.

### Notes

\*This is a revised version of the paper read at the 12th meeting of the West Branch of The Japan Society For Medieval Studies held at Osaka University in June 1996.

1. All the examples are taken from Atkins edition (1992) based on the Jesus Manuscript.
2. The quotation means that either the Owl or the Nightingale utters the word in question as they quote what someone says.
3. The negative means that the Owl or the Nightingale utters the word in question in a negative sentence.
4. 'B' in 'A+B' refers to the frequency of the word in question said of someone or something concerning the Owl or the Nightingale.

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